

The Wilson Times

Wilson County voices concern over Atlantic Coast Pipeline

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Wilson County commissioners unanimously passed a resolution Tuesday calling for Atlantic Coast Pipeline officials to be more transparent in their dealings with property owners and local government when it comes to development and safety issues.

Several energy companies have proposed plans to build a 600-mile natural gas pipeline through West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina, which would include some 12 miles of 36-inch, high-pressure pipeline running through the western side of Wilson County.

The primary backers of the pipeline project are Dominion Energy and Duke Energy.

Commissioners expressed reservations on several issues related to the pipeline project and its officials Tuesday, including a “development dead zone” in Wilson County, full and complete disclosures and transparency in project planners’ dealings with property owners and the pipeline’s quality of construction and safety.

Commissioner say ACP officials failed to inform property owners or local government that there is an “industry [effort] to create a ‘consultation planning zone’ which extends 660 feet from the center of any high pressure natural gas pipeline,” according to the resolution.

The purpose of the zone or corridor is to “restrict development” within those parameters for the “lifetime of the pipeline,” the resolution states.

Property owners within that zone have not been offered compensation for restrictions placed on their property outside of the construction and permanent easements, commissioners said.

They say these types of development restrictions will severely affect the value of land and property owned by county residents.

That planning zone, according to the resolution, would create a “development dead zone” 1,300 feet wide by 12 miles long running through the heart of western Wilson County. And that would lower property values and “adversely affect” both residents and Wilson County as a whole, they said.

The pipeline project is slated to enter Wilson County north of Sims and extends for 12 miles into Johnson County not far from Kenly.

DEVELOPMENT DEAD ZONE

Commissioner Rob Boyette, who introduced the resolution, said this information recently came to light.

“We have learned it is standard practice in the pipeline industry that once the pipeline has been constructed, easements have been negotiated and signed, that some time after that, local government is expected to go in where there is a high pressure, large volume of natural gas pipeline,” Boyette said. “But there is an expectation that local government will go in and create what is considered a ‘planning zone.’ And we are heavily concerned that this restriction of property rights and development in this area.”

Boyette said in addition to that “development dead zone,” none of the property owners affected by those zoning restrictions would receive any compensation from Atlantic Coast Pipeline operators. And that’s something commissioners are greatly concerned about, he said.

Boyette said the pipeline’s path through Wilson County is considered to be in a rural area. But western Wilson County has been developing for some time and commissioners see that development continuing in the future.

“And it’s important to our county as a whole for that development to continue unrestricted,” Boyette said.

Boyette said he knows there are some residents for and against the pipeline. But county commissioners believe that all residents can make the best decisions for themselves and their families when they have been properly informed, he added.

“It’s critical that truth and transparency and information be shared at the earliest date possible so that when our citizens are executing contracts, easements with the ACP representatives and others, that they can make the best decisions possible,” he said.

‘MIXED INFORMATION’

Boyette said over the past two years, he’s been to more than a dozen meetings in three counties regarding the pipeline project. But no one has ever mentioned a “development zone” that was a part of an industry standard that local government would be expected to create as a consequence of the pipeline’s installation and construction.

“And we have a major concern about that,” he said. “That’s an example on how we feel communication needs to be improved.”

Commissioner Bill Blackman said he’s had several calls and emails from property owners regarding the pipeline contract. He gave an example of a recent meeting with a property owner. He said ACP officials changed the pipeline route going across this resident’s property.

“He didn’t understand when he signed the papers he already settled,” Blackman said. “He lives in a tenant house and he’s lived there for years. If something were to happen to that house, he can’t replace it. It’s that close. He was unaware of that when he signed the papers. I think there is some mixed information for people who own the land that they are not being told.”

SAFETY FOR ALL

Boyette said a pipeline can be built according to three safety standards — Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. The construction quality of the pipeline is currently rated as a Level 2 instead of the higher safety level of a 1, he said.

“The reason for that is because most of the area that goes through is considered a rural area, although we do have a high-consequence area just east of Sims. And it is our belief that every citizen matters. One citizen is just as important as any other citizen in the county. They should have the same rights, the same opportunities, the same protection, the same safety.”

He said commissioners fully believe the pipeline should be built to the highest standard possible. He said residents who are in the proposed area, whether “you call it a development zone or a blast zone” their safety is “a paramount importance to us and it should continue to be.”

In August, Commissioners Boyette and Roger Lucas attended a meeting hosted by the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality at Nash County Community College. The issues commissioners have right now were not discussed, they said. And Lucas said he had a lot of concerns that came out of that meeting as well, including the blast zone which is a quarter of a mile, he said.

Lucas said the safety zone layout is only 40 yards beyond what a total fatality for what a blast zone would be, according to a credible study he said he found.

“There are a lot of people that live within that zone,” he said. “I find that kind of hard to swallow.”

Lucas said he knows there are some good things that have come about from the pipeline, but that everybody deserves the same amount of safety and protection.

“And that’s where I’m coming from as a commissioner,” he said.

He said the lack of information being put out there when decisions are being made is also concerning.

CONFUSION FOR PROPERTY OWNERS

Board of Commissioners Chairwoman Bobbie Jones said there have been a lot of questions unanswered and people are confused, especially property owners.

Jones mentioned Monday's story in The Wilson Times citing officials with Clean Water for North Carolina who say the pipeline is routed through areas with higher poverty than other areas in the state. Officials also said the pipeline would pass through communities that are more than 60 percent African-American and more than 95 percent Native American.

And that caused even more concern for Jones.

"It sounds like there's been some choices made without due process," Jones said. "I just disagree with this."

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a certificate permitting ACP construction and supply header project Monday. A couple of weeks ago, the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality's Division of Energy, Mineral and Land Resource sent a letter of disapproval of the pipeline developers' erosion and sedimentation control plan.